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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN MUSLIM LEAGUE - NAWAZ MOVING TOWARDS
MID-TERM ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Anne W. Patterson. Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif stated that the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is moving towards forcing mid-term legislative elections due to the poor performance and growing unpopularity of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government. Shahbaz viewed these moves towards a more aggressive posture on the part of the PML-N as essential to forestalling a political power vacuum caused by popular discontent that could be exploited by anti-democratic forces. Shahbaz asserted that democratic structures would be at risk should the PPP's poor governance be allowed to continue. He implied that the courts and/or a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly could be part of the PML-N strategy for forcing mid-term elections. While Shahbaz did not offer an exact time frame for the PML-N move, he indicated that it was being considered on an expeditious basis. Internal PML-N restructuring and elections make any move unlikely earlier than February 2010. End Summary.

12. (C) In an October 2 meeting, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif informed PolCouns and Lahore Principal Officer that his party was moving towards mid-term elections. Shahbaz characterized the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government as weak, unpopular, and highly corrupt. He argued that the PPP's failure to deliver basic services to the population and the continuing news stories of corruption emanating out of Islamabad had undercut any credibility that President Zardari or his government had. Shahbaz argued that public support for a change in government had grown considerably and that failure on the part of the opposition to respond to the public's calls could endanger the entire democratic system.

13. (C) Shahbaz feared that if a democratic change in government was not brought about through mid-term elections, it could enable anti-democratic forces to intervene again in Pakistani politics. Shahbaz, who had returned the night before from Rawalpindi following what the local press have rumored to be meetings with the top military brass, stated that the military was openly concerned about the deteriorating state of governance. Shahbaz argued that if public pressure for a change increased and the opposition failed to bring one about in a democratic way, the military would be hard pressed not to intervene either directly or subtly to cause the government to fall. Shahbaz praised Chief of Army Staff Kiyani's reluctance to enter into politics, but noted that Kiyani would face his own pressures from within the military leadership to which he would eventually have to respond.

14. (C) Shahbaz was equally concerned about his party's own credibility should the PML-N continue the role of supportive opposition. Shahbaz noted that there was already growing pressure within the party for its leadership to take a more

confrontational stance with the PPP over issues of economic management. Shahbaz claimed that to date the leadership had not done so as it remained committed to the Charter of Democracy's goal of seeing governments fulfill their five-year mandate. Shahbaz asserted, however, that this restraint and commitment was no longer tenable as the PML-N needed to act in order to preserve the democratic system and to appease its supporters, who were increasingly agitated. In the current scenario, Shahbaz asserted that the PML-N had no choice but to begin planning for mid-term elections in the near term (Note: While a timeframe was not specifically stated, the PML-N's own internal reorganization/election process is slated to take at least four months making a move before then unlikely. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Shahbaz was noncommittal as to the method that the PML-N would use in order to challenge the current government and bring about mid-term elections. He was clear that new elections were the ultimate goal of the process and repeatedly assured PolCouns and PO that the methods used would be constitutional -- meaning any military/intelligence role in the process was unlikely to be prominent. Shahbaz mentioned both the National Reconciliation Ordinance and court interest in Zardari's corruption during the conversation, suggesting that Supreme Court action may be part of the PML-N strategy. Shahbaz also referenced discontent within the governing coalition, suggesting a possible outreach by the PML-N to smaller coalition parties.

¶6. (C) PolCouns and PO reiterated the USG desire to see the government complete as much of its full five-year term as possible. Shahbaz concurred that this was an ideal scenario, but repeatedly pressed that PPP conduct in government had made that impossible. Shahbaz rationalized that if the PPP were allowed to continue much longer in government, its graph would fall so low that the party would be virtually eliminated in the mid-term elections. This, Shahbaz argued, needed to be avoided as the military would then view a successor government as a virtual civilian dictatorship (as in Nawaz Sharif's 1997-99 tenure) and would directly intervene in fairly short order. Shahbaz asserted this meant that new elections should be held on an accelerated timetable to avoid the complete collapse of the PPP at the polls.

¶7. (C) While backing mid-term elections, Shahbaz shared that a decision on Nawaz Sharif's participation in possible upcoming by-elections was uncertain. He cited specific terrorist threat information against Nawaz Sharif that would make it exceptionally difficult to justify Nawaz's participation. Risking Nawaz's life in an election that would, at most, make him Leader of the Opposition was, Shahbaz noted, difficult for many in the party leadership to accept. Nawaz, he claimed, would make the final decision after his return from London.

¶8. (C) Former PML-N Finance Secretary Pervaiz Malik told PolCouns on October 3 that he had received an early morning phone call from Nawaz in London instructing Malik to file hastily candidate papers that would allow Malik to contest for Nawaz's traditional constituency. Malik, who held Nawaz's traditional seat for him from 2002-2007 when Nawaz was in exile, interpreted this as a signal that Malik, not/not Nawaz, would be the final PML-N candidate for the Lahore NA-123 seat. Note: It is common practice for parties to submit nominating papers for more than one candidate for an election race in case the party's primary candidate is disqualified. These "covering candidates" later withdraw from the race. The last minute nature of the instructions for Malik to file in a race where the PML-N already had a main and several covering candidates is a strong indication that the main candidate, Nawaz Sharif, is seriously contemplating withdrawing. End Note.

¶9. (C) Comment: Shahbaz appeared quite sincere in his conviction that mid-term elections were both desirable and PML-N policy. Post assesses that Shahbaz could not have made such a direct and dramatic change in rhetoric absent the blessing of Nawaz Sharif. The statements track with Nawaz's

decision to dissolve party structures and move to internal PML-N elections (a move generally taken only when mid-term elections are contemplated) and his recent, now unsuccessful, overtures to Members of the National Assembly from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Any move towards mid-term legislative elections would be separate from a move towards new presidential elections, which can happen only through impeachment (requiring two-thirds of the National Assembly and Senate), Supreme Court action, military intervention, or President Zardari's resignation/death.

¶10. (C) Post recommends, at this stage, that we continue with our current pace of engagement with the Sharifs, reiterating our view that the PPP should be given an opportunity to serve out as much of its mandate as possible in a non-confrontational manner. Greatly increased pressure on the brothers may well cause them to accelerate rather than postpone their election plans and possibly cause them to increase their engagement with the military/intelligence establishment as a counterweight to perceived open American support for the PPP. End Comment.

PATTERSON